

"Immigrant Indigestion"

A. Philip Randolph, Radical and Restrictionist

By Daryl Scott

In the pantheon of twentieth century black leaders, few are more prominent than A. Philip Randolph. For half a century, he stood at the center of the struggle for black rights. The embodiment of the black protest tradition, Randolph was the architect of the World War II Double Victory campaign in which blacks struggled against Nazism abroad and racial discrimination at home. He threatened a march on Washington that resulted in the nation's first fair employment policy. A generation later, the Old Lion, as he was sometimes called, played a leading role in the Civil Rights Movement, including the famed March on Washington. Though W.E.B. Du Bois, Booker T. Washington, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X were and are better known to the public, Randolph was as prominent as any other black leader between the wars. The NAACP's James Weldon Johnson and Walter White were of no greater stature.

More than his contemporaries, Randolph bridged the generations, exemplifying the traits associated with the New Negro, the generation that followed Washington and preceded the integrationists of the 1950s. He was the first to combine separate group organization with militant protest on behalf of inclusion. He pioneered organizing the masses rather than seeking the support of white elites. He forged the alliance between blacks and labor, a central element of the civil rights era. For this alone, his place in the history of the black left is secure.

Given his stature and his record of racial and labor radicalism, it may be news to some that A. Philip Randolph was also an immigration restrictionist. Certainly, it's not a part of his reputation. Indeed, Randolph's biographer, Jervis Anderson, ignored the forthright position Randolph took.¹ Among modern national black leaders, Randolph was virtually alone

on his immigration position. By exploring the nature and origin of Randolph's position on immigration we might gain a better understanding of both the pro-immigration and pro-restriction impulses among twentieth century national black leaders. I would like to argue that what made Randolph different was that he was a native-born labor leader in an age when labor was restrictionist.

The New Negro Black Leadership

Prior to World War I, the relative benefits of immigration restriction for African Americans were no more than conjecture. The experience of World War I, however, revealed how different black life could be if only there were fewer foreigners in the North. The war had curtailed their number while drawing blacks from cotton fields into Northern factories.

The black community was well aware of the economic advantages of restriction. Everywhere in the black press the connection was made. The leading black newspaper, the *Chicago Defender*, insisted that "It is vitally important to keep the immigration gates partly closed until our working class gets a chance to prove our worth in occupations other than those found on plantations. The scarcity of labor creates the demand. With the average American white man's turn of mind, the white foreign laborer is given preference over the black home product. When the former is not available, the latter gets an inning."² The historian Arnold Shankman has concluded that the black

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community had a definite position on immigration, saying “Blacks favored immigration restriction, for they were persuaded that the steady influx of foreigners was an obstacle to their own economic advancement.”³

This anti-immigration sentiment was made possible in part by the rising collective consciousness among blacks. Scholars have noted that a New Negro was born in the World War I era and that African Americans increasingly felt proud of their racial membership and group institutions. This new attitude made them less

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apologetic about pursuing their own interests. Robert Abbott, the editor of the *Defender*, had no problem with pursuing what is now called interest-group politics. Abbott stated, “We would not be conserving our own best interest if we did not endorse the [restrictionist] stand taken by the American Federation of Labor.”⁴

Restrictionist sentiment was also underwritten by the surge of American nationalism blacks felt after World War I. Having served their country in its effort to make the world safe for democracy, African Americans had demonstrated to themselves, if not to the satisfaction of some whites, that they were loyal Americans. No sooner had the war ended then did black elites write books and essays touting the Negro America's role in the struggle. Booker T. Washington's former secretary, Emmett Scott, wrote an instant history of black participation.⁵

Racial pride and American patriotism proved fertile ground for those who believed black Americans deserved opportunity more than foreign whites. Put another way, the nationalism unleashed by the war made African Americans less concerned about universalism and more concerned about pursuing their own group interests as blacks and as Americans.

At the grass roots level, the nationalism that fueled the restrictionist impulse often revealed an unattractive, racist undertone. No different from many white restrictionists, the Pittsburgh *Courier*, for instance, could not refrain from coupling pejorative stereotypes with its economic nationalism. In addition to its economic argument, the paper held that Americans should monopolize Pullman porter jobs on the railroads because the Japanese were “too short to make down the upper birth without a ladder.”⁶

Nascent Civil Rights Leadership

Despite the popular sentiment for restriction among blacks in general, national black leaders did not organize in favor of restrictive measures. The two major black advocacy organizations, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the National Urban League lent nothing to the public debate over basic policy. Many Urban League reformers, including founders like Frances Kellor, identified with the immigrants.⁷ Pro-immigration theorist Robert Park of the University of Chicago also was part of the organization's leadership and black intellectual Charles S. Johnson, Park's student and editor of the Urban League's *Opportunity*, shared his mentor's assimilation theory.⁸ Johnson, for

instance, held that Mexicans in Texas were not affecting black workers adversely. In fact, he held that Mexicans were pushing blacks up the economic ladder.⁹ The influence of the Urban League and Chicago School on the thought of national black leaders should not be underestimated. Most leading black intellectuals who came of age during the interwar years were influenced by the Chicago School or the Urban League.¹⁰

The potential for restrictionist ideas emanating from the NAACP was better. One need only examine the ideas of W.E.B. Du Bois to view the prospect of the NAACP's being restrictionist. At the turn of the century, Du Bois, despite being a critic of White Anglo-Saxon Protestants, was very much oriented to their world. He had attended the great WASP schools and even shared their ethnic chauvinism, especially against Jews. As Henry Louis Gates, Jr., has pointed out, Du Bois' now-famous *Souls of Black Folks* originally contained several negative references to Jews. After interacting with Jews in the NAACP, however, Du Bois substituted the word “immigrants” for “Jews” in his text. Apparently, this was offensive to neither the WASPs nor the Jews with whom Du Bois associated.¹¹

Ideological potential notwithstanding, the Urban League and the NAACP both continued the nineteenth-century trend among civil rights leaders into the 1920s. From Frederick Douglass to Booker T. Washington, those who were considered national black leaders spoke out only against the discriminatory aspects of immigration policy. They did not speak out against restriction in the 1920s.¹²

For leaders concerned with the principle of racial inclusion, their silence is particularly noticeable. Even

when not motivated by racism, exclusionary policies strike against the inclusionist ideal of civil rights leaders. Those seeking the moral high ground on rights tend to universalize them rather than make them a function of citizenship. In the 1920s concerns about the motives of the exclusionist were justified, for many were unabashed racists.

Rather than condemning restrictionism outright for its association with bigotry, black civil rights leaders limited their comments to discrimination against Asians and West Indians. There is little doubt that the silence of national civil rights leaders reflected their private support for restriction. No different from blacks taken by nationalist sentiments, the civil rights leadership was well aware of the boon that wartime restriction had been to blacks. W.E.B. Du Bois commented on the politics of black people's silence on immigration restriction; "Colored America has been silent on the immigration quota controversy for two reasons: First, the stopping of the importing of cheap white labor on any terms has been the economic salvation of American black labor." Du Bois's second explanation for silence reveals the rift between native-born and foreign blacks. Du Bois stated that some foreign blacks had increased black American suffering by "frustrating our efforts and misunderstanding our ideals."¹³

Randolph and Restriction

If the perceived contradiction between their restrictionist desires and inclusionist principle led civil rights leaders to silence, not all national black leaders were silent. In August of 1924, A. Philip Randolph articulated the most thoroughgoing opposition to immigration: "Instead of reducing immigration to 2 percent of the 1890 quota, we favor reducing it to nothing.... We favor shutting out the Germans from Germany, the Italians from Italy...the Hindus from India, the Chinese from China, and even the Negroes from the West Indies. This country is suffering from immigrant indigestion." Randolph made clear that his reason was economic and social. "It is time to call a halt on this grand rush for American gold," he said, "which over-floods the labor market, resulting in lowering the standard of living, race-riots, and general social degradation. The excessive immigration is against the interests of the masses of all races and nationalities in the country — both foreign and native."¹⁴

Randolph's restrictionist position may have very well been influenced by his experience as a southern migrant to New York City amid the large influx of West Indians during the period. Born in 1889 in Jacksonville,

Florida, Randolph moved to New York at the moment that West Indians as well as African Americans were arriving in the city in large numbers.¹⁵ In 1930, over 50,000 foreign blacks lived in New York.¹⁶ As Du Bois' second reason for silence reveals, many African Americans were hostile toward West Indians.

Certainly Randolph also could be harsh on West Indians. Yet his basis of criticism of West Indians lay in their political shortcomings, not their economic competition or ethnic chauvinism. For all their talk of resisting

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oppression, West Indians, Randolph believed, did not take the appropriate steps to organize against discrimination. Most notably, Randolph castigated West Indians for not becoming citizens of the United States. To challenge discrimination, blacks, he held, needed political power, and such power could only be garnered by citizens. "It is also elementary that whether one be a citizen or not, he is affected by the legislation of the country where he happens to be residing." He called for black immigrants to follow the example of the Jews and the Irish who had become citizens to increase their clout.¹⁷

Randolph's restrictionism cannot be dismissed as an aberration of the postwar years. In the 1930s he supported legislation to exclude non-Americans from working on railroads in as servants. The Pullman company had often used Asians to weaken the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters' union-recognition drive.¹⁸ In 1933, Randolph supported legislation introduced by Sen. Clarence C. Dill of Washington that forced railroads to hire only American citizens in service positions when engaged in interstate commerce. When asked his opinion of the bill by the NAACP's Walter White, Randolph endorsed it. For civil rights leaders such as Walter White, it was the affinity between nationalism and racial exclusion that prompted them to oppose restrictionist or exclusionist immigration policies. Despite what it held out for black labor, he opposed the Dill bill.¹⁹

Walter White did not have a monopoly on principles, and Randolph was far from lacking in that department. In fact, all who knew Randolph thought of him as a person of principle and integrity. Of him, Oswald Garrison Villard of the NAACP wrote, "They say that [Randolph] is absolutely to be trusted, that he cannot be influenced unduly. He stands four-square to all the winds,

he stoops to no wiles or artifices to attain his goals. He is steeped in principle, and he has the complete certainty of a true reformer in the eventual triumph of his cause. He adopts none until he is certain it is morally right and that it will result in advantage to the entire community.”²⁰ Unlike many other restrictionists, including many African Americans, Randolph did not form his restrictionist ideas out of hatred or xenophobia. It appears no one ever accused him of doing so.

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Like most restrictionists, Randolph came to his position out of loyalty to and concern for his group. As a boy in Florida, he experienced the rise of Jim Crow, which came down as forcibly on his world as Redemption had come down on his father’s. A working-class minister in the African Methodist Episcopal Church, Randolph’s father had a strong racial consciousness and idolized the black nationalist Bishop Henry McNeal Turner. Turner’s nationalism was never the cheap and dirty variety born of hatred; rather, it was born of the righteousness of the oppressed who had long harbored the idea of racial reconciliation. Bishop Turner left a lasting influence on the minister’s son.²¹

Across ideological lines, Randolph identified with those who took the group’s problem as their own and sought solutions to it. From his days in Jacksonville to his early years in New York, Randolph politicized black identity. Beside having Turner offered as a role model, Randolph admired W.E.B. Du Bois for his spirit of protest and his advocacy of social equality. While rejecting the accommodationist posture of Booker T. Washington, Randolph could not help but respect his organizational ability.²²

After moving to New York, Randolph encountered socialism and embraced it. He did so not as a universalist, but rather as a black intellectual seeking a greater understanding of the oppression of his group and a solution to their problem. As his biographer, Jervis Anderson, has stated, “A believer previously in pure-and-simple racial radicalism, he now felt that if some of the conditions which victimized black Americans were endemic to the nation’s economic life...then the movement for racial freedom could not proceed independently of the

movement for social and economic change.”²³ While Randolph broadened his analysis, he continued to see the validity of the struggle of peoples, not simply classes. He once wrote, “Salvation for a race, nation, or class must come from within.”²⁴ Committed to his group’s advance, Randolph sidestepped the pitfall of seeing blacks simply as workers.

If the plight of blacks led Randolph to socialism, it also appears that his concern about blacks as a laboring people led him to immigration restriction. Quite often labor organizers who had climbed through the ranks of the oppressed articulated a radicalism forged in their national as well as their class consciousness. Ever rooted in a national identity, the American Federation of Labor, for instance, often seemed concerned only about workers who fit its description of an American. Having placed boundaries on the working-class community of its concern, the AFL viewed restrictionist policies as a prerogative for protecting the interest of both class and nation.²⁵

Randolph’s restrictionist views never turned hostile to immigrants because Randolph never gave himself over to nationalism of any sort, not to mention jingoistic brands. Though he worked with nationalists such as Marcus Garvey and Malcolm X and shared their tendency to place their race’s interests first, Randolph never defined the other as an enemy.²⁶ Whatever the influence of his upbringing, socialism helped him to identify with the working class of other nations as well as with white Americans. The respect he had for other groups placed him in opposition to attempts on the left to pit identity groups against one another for the cause of radicalism. He recoiled at the prospect that communists in Harlem were teaching West Africans to distrust and hate whites.²⁷ Randolph’s restrictionist views were coupled with the hope that workers elsewhere would improve their lot by organizing in their own countries. For much of his career, he sought to expand labor organization among Africans. He wanted them to gain education here, as well as in Africa, in order to return to their countries and foster change for workers.²⁸

Within the black community of New York, where he worked his entire career, Randolph’s restrictionist ideas took courage and conviction. Beside placing him at odds with the hardcore inclusionists among civil rights leaders, it pitted him against the black radical tradition being forged in New York City. West Indians, who were among the leading black socialists, were decidedly for open immigration and against the discriminatory treatment of immigrants and, through their influence, the National Negro Congress of the 1930s sided with the

immigrants.²⁹ I have no evidence of open conflict, but Randolph's views, as well as the those of the West Indian radicals, were well known.

While it took courage for him to go against the radical mainstream, his position was viable because it had support both within his group and in other circles. Beside the support of rank-and-file black leaders and intellectuals, Randolph probably knew he had the silent support of leaders like W.E.B. Du Bois. Moreover, Randolph certainly knew that as a labor leader his ideas were typical among the American Federation of Labor, the group from which the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters sought recognition. As the labor movement opened itself up to black participation, Randolph became a prominent member of the movement, serving on the executive council of the AFL-CIO. In other words, his restrictionist views had enough support in important circles to keep him from being an outcast.

If participation in the labor movement was conducive to restrictionist thinking, the workers' movement did the cause of restriction more harm than good. While

black workers appeared to have less affinity for immigrants than their white counterparts, the racial views of labor-oriented restrictionists and labor in general served to stigmatize the cause. Certainly, the racial dimension of labor restrictionism did little to heal the rift between black civil rights leaders and labor. Notably, blacks who cared about working people were more likely to gravitate toward the anti-restrictionist and anti-racist communist party than the mainstream labor movement.

What Randolph thought of immigration reform in postwar America remains unknown. His personal papers provide no insight to how he viewed the McCarran-Walter Act of 1952 and the Hart-Celler Act of 1965. Given that his concern was focused on African Americans, the general prosperity of the postwar years, no different from that of the 1920s, probably had little affect on his thinking. The plight of displaced farm workers may very well have prompted Randolph to remain a supporter of restriction, but his silence on the issue underscores how much black leaders invested in civil rights as a solution to black poverty.

EndNotes

¹ Jervis Anderson, A. Philip Randolph: A Biographical Portrait, reprint, 1974. A Harvest Book, HB 280 (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich).

² Editorial, *Chicago Defender* (January 5, 1924), p.1

³ Arnold Shankman, *Ambivalent Friends: Afro-Americans View the Immigrant* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1982), 46-47

⁴ *Chicago Defender* (March 1, 1924), p.1

⁵ Emmett J. Scott, *Scott's Official History of the American Negro in the World War* (Chicago: Homewood Press, 1919).

⁶ *Pittsburgh Courier*, February 18, 1933. Quoted in Shankman, *Ambivalent*, p. 49.

⁷ Frances Kellor, *Immigration and the Future* (New York: George H. Doran, 1920).

⁸ Daryl Michael Scott, *Contempt and Pity: Social Policy and the Image of the Black Psyche, 1880-1996* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), Chapters 2 and 3.

⁹ See Shankman, p. 73.

¹⁰ The black social scientists with Park connections included E. Franklin Frazier, Horace Cayton, and St. Clair Drake. The Urban League hired promising non-Chicagoans such as Haynes and Ira DeA.. Reid.

¹¹ Henry Louis Gates, Jr. "Introduction," *The Souls of Black Folks* by W.E.B. DuBois (New York: Bantam Books, 1989), pp. Xxvi-xxix.

¹² I have found no evidence in either primary or secondary sources. See Shankman.

¹³ W.E.B. Du Bois, "Immigration Quota," *The Crisis* (August 1929).

¹⁴ Editorial, "Immigration and Japan," *The Messenger* (August 1924), 247.

¹⁵ Anderson, *Randolph*, 23.

¹⁶ David J. Hellwig, "Black Meets Black: Afro-American Reactions to West Indian Immigrants in the 1920s," *77 South Atlantic Quarterly*: 207.

¹⁷ *The Messenger*, 5 (february 1923), 613; *The Messenger*, 1 (November 1817), 1516. Cited and quoted in David J. Hellwig, "Black Meets

Black: Afro-American Reactions to West Indian Immigrants in the 1920s," *77 South Atlantic Quarterly*: 214-15.

¹⁸ See Shankman, pp. 19, 49.

¹⁹ William Harris, *Keeping the Faith: A. Philip Randolph, Milton P. Webster, and the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977), 179. Walter White to A. Philip Randolph, Feb. 23, 1933 and Randolph to White, March 2, 1933, NAACP Papers, I-C-414.

²⁰ Quoted in Jervis Anderson, *Randolph*, p. vii.

²¹ See Anderson, pp. 11, 30, 41.

²² See Anderson, p. 58.

²³ See Anderson, p. 63

²⁴ See Anderson, p. vii.

²⁵ Mollie Ray Carroll, *Labor and Politics: the Attitude of the American Federation of Labor Toward Legislation and Politics* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1923), 118-23. The racism against Asians and Southern and Eastern Europeans was unabashed. The Europeans were considered "undesirable and injurious." Of the Chinese, they wrote: "We cannot afford to trifle with a race so utterly unassimilative." American Federation of Labor, *Convention Proceedings*, 1902, pp. 21,22. Quoted in Carroll, pp. 119, 121n.

²⁶ See Anderson, pp. 90,101-104.

²⁷ Norman Thomas to A. Philip Randolph, December 31, 1952 and A. Philip Randolph to Norman Thomas, January 16, 1953. A. Philip Randolph Papers.

²⁸ A. Philip Randolph to George F. McCray, September 13, 1955; report on Trip to Africa, July 15, 1956; George T. Brown to A. Philip Randolph, October 31, 1975; A Philip Randolph to George T. Brown, November 19, 1957, A. Philip Randolph Papers. Interview with A. Philip Randolph by Maide Springer Hemp, June 6, 1973, Oral History Program.

²⁹ Ira DeA.. Reid, *The Negro Immigrant*, reprint, 1939 (New York: AMS Press, 1958), 109.

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